

## To Boldly Go: When Fate Deals the Cards

A U.S.S. *Providence* story

by Cleve Johnson

Space. Sometimes the silence of the infinite void can almost be deafening. If it were not for the vacuum, the sound of the passing starship's engines would be heard for dozens of kilometers, assuming anyone would be floating around the cosmos to listen.

The U.S.S. *Providence* flew toward the unexplored planet. Its mission --to seek out new life on the new worlds that its crew discovered.

"Can the signal be a natural phenomenon?" Commander Leeson asked.

Lieutenant Commander T'Les continued to scan the anomaly. "The probability of this signal being naturally occurring is 4,796 to 1," she stated. "I have not yet located the exact point of origin, but it appears to be coming from an orbital position."

Captain Stuart arose from his chair and stepped down the steps toward the CONN station. "Standard orbital approach," he said.

"Aye Skipper," Lieutenant Commander Blake Adams replied. "I'm getting a card game together at 1900 hours," Adams said invitingly. "Are you interested?"

Stuart patted Blake on the shoulder and smiled. "You know I'm not much of a poker player."

"That's why you're invited," Blake teased.

Leeson, sitting at the XO position, glanced at Adams. She tried not to smile, but Blake's laid back personality, his wit, and his boyish charm prevented her from remaining too stoic. Melanie Leeson had grown fond of Adams, even come to love him, in the past several months. And she knew that he had grown close to her. But on the bridge, the two Starfleet officers agreed to be completely professional toward each other. Almost. "Is that game open to anyone, Mister Adams?" she inquired stiffly.

"Absolutely, Commander," Blake replied. "Come prepared to win, but expect to lose."

Leeson smirked. "I guess someone needs to take your cockiness down a notch."

Blake Adams turned his chair to face Leeson. "You never know what might happen when fate deals the cards," he said, winking at her.

Stuart watched his first officer and best friend spar words with each other. But they had work to do. "I think I might come just to watch the two of you," Stuart said. "But right now we have a mission to complete."

Leeson's face turned flush. "You're absolutely right, Captain."

Adams merely turned back to flying the ship.

T'les, who had ignored the illogical conversation as she continually scanned for the source of the transmission that they had intercepted. After several minutes she finally

locked onto the signal's source. "Captain, I have located the source of the signal," T'Les informed Stuart. "It is coming from what appears to be a satellite that is alien to us."

Stuart started up the steps toward the center seat. "Blake," Stuart said as he turned and sat down, "bring us within five hundred kilometers."

"Aye, Skipper."

"Captain," T'Les said. "The satellite's orbit is decaying. It has already entered the planet's atmosphere."

Stuart watched the image on the viewscreen begin to glow as it plummeted through the thermosphere. "Mary, get a tractor beam on it."

Lieutenant Mary Goodman's fingers played the OPS control panel like a virtuoso at the piano. "Unable to get a positive lock, Sir," she said. "Something in the atmosphere is interfering with the beam."

Stuart's gaze remained on the viewscreen as the alien transmitter continued to glow brighter and finally burn up in its fiery descent through Trilarnex Two's atmosphere.

Silence permeated the bridge. The mysterious signal had been traced to an alien object, a beacon of information forever gone.

Stuart looked toward the science station. "Were you able to analyze the signal, Commander?" he asked the Vulcan.

"The code is unknown," T'Les stated. "I made a recording for further analysis."

"Good work, Commander," Stuart complimented. "Do you have any theories?"

T'Les checked several readings from the sensor scans that she had recorded. "I am not prone to making guesses," she said, "but I believe that this may have been a ship's emergency buoy, transmitting a distress signal."

The bridge was silent. For a moment, no one let out a breath as the crew and duty officers looked toward Captain Stuart for his decision.

Finally, the captain spoke. "Full sensor sweeps. This may have just turned into a rescue mission."

### ***Three Weeks Later...***

The ship glided smoothly toward Starbase 82, the light of the sun glistening on the hull of the Federation vessel. The *Excelsior*-class ship slowed as a tractor beam took hold and drew it near the main space doors that were in the process of opening.



### ***Personal Log: Stardate 53428.1***

*I still cannot believe that my crew and I survived the destruction of the Providence. The ship went before its time and I find myself missing it. Silly, I know, but It was my first ship to command and I wonder if I could have saved it. We barely had begun to survey the unknown sectors of the Beta Quadrant beyond Romulan space when disaster cut our*

*voyage short. Hopefully, I can get another ship to go back and pick up where I left off. I hate leaving a job undone.*

Captain Rob Stuart, formerly of the late U.S.S. *Providence*, stared out of the window of the quarters that he had been assigned. He always marveled at the size of these starbases. The engineering wonder of producing orbital structures that could contain several starships within each one awed him. He gazed at the size of the docking bay as the *Eisenhower* passed through the massive opening.

Stuart could see a *Galaxy*-class starship undergoing repairs and two of the newer *Katana*-class docked. But a much smaller ship, partially obscured behind one of the *Katana*'s, caught his eye. It had the familiar saucer shape of most Federation starships and had a similar design of the older *Miranda*-class ships with warp nacelles that were swept under instead of upward. It did not look like it was much bigger than a *Defiant*-class, but it clearly did not have the "look" of an escort vessel. Possibly a new type of science ship would be Stuart's guess.

The door chime interrupted Stuart's analysis of the unknown starship. "Come," he said.

The doors parted and Captain Thelasa Krendlar, an Andorian, entered. "Am I disturbing you, Captain?" the officer inquired.

"Not at all," Stuart replied as he walked toward the doorway. "I was just admiring the newer classes of starships in the spacedock."

The Andorian captain nodded agreement. "Starfleet has been busy rebuilding the fleet since you left for the Beta Quadrant," she said.

Both officers were momentarily silent. But after a few seconds, Thelasa spoke. "Admiral Hernandez will be waiting at the docking port for you."

Stuart did not look forward to meeting Juana Hernandez. He had nothing personal against the admiral, but the idea of reporting to the base commanding officer after losing one of Starfleet's most advanced ships left his stomach feeling like it just competed in a gymnastics meet. "I appreciate you giving us a lift," Stuart said as he extended his hand toward his counterpart.

The CO of the *Eisenhower* grasped Stuart's hand and shook it, her eyes communicating understanding and reassurance. "Good luck Captain."

And Stuart left the room.

## **Chapter 1**

Rob Stuart waited for the airlock to open. From behind, he could hear the footsteps of two people coming toward him. "I should have known that I couldn't get off the ship alone," he said as he turned toward Melanie Leeson and Blake Adams.

"I didn't want you to face the admiral without backup," Leeson said.

"What about you, Blake?" Stuart asked.

"Moral support," Blake said off the cuff. "Besides," he added, "I need to start scouting out the recreation facilities for the crew."

Stuart shook his head, smiling. “I forgot that crew morale was one of your primary duties while at a starbase.”

The airlock slid open and the three officers strode down the long gangway toward a security desk. The junior grade lieutenant rose to attention and greeted the trio.

“I’m Captain Stuart of the U.S.S. *Providence*,” Stuart stated. “Commander Melanie Leeson, Lieutenant Commander Blake Adams, and I ask permission to come aboard.”

The security officer keyed some information into his data console. “Permission granted, Sir,” he said. “And it is good to see you again Commander Leeson.”

Leeson nodded at the young officer. “I see you have been promoted, Stanton,” Leeson commented. “Congratulations,” she added before moving past the desk to catch up with Stuart and Adams, who had already continued toward the reception area.

“Thank you, Commander,” Lieutenant Stanton said, glad that his former CO had remembered his name after almost a year.

Admiral Juana Hernandez stood at the end of the gangway, just inside the reception area of docking port 78A. She waited with hands behind her back until the trio from the now-deceased U.S.S. *Providence* came near.

Captain Stuart snapped to attention two feet in front of the admiral. “Captain Robert P. Stuart reporting, Sir,” he said formally.

The admiral sized up Stuart and his senior officers. She already knew Melanie Leeson from the time that Stuart’s executive officer had been the security chief of the starbase. “At ease, Captain,” Hernandez said. “And welcome to Starbase 82.”

Stuart nodded toward Leeson and Adams. “Commander Leeson I believe you know,” he stated as a matter-of-fact. “And this is my second officer, Lieutenant Commander Adams.”

Admiral Hernandez shook each of the officer's hands. “Good to see you again, Mel,” she replied. “And a pleasure to meet you Mister Adams.”

Leeson and Adams exchanged the usual pleasantries with the admiral, but Hernandez preferred to talk with Captain Stuart in private. “Quarters have been arranged for your crew, Captain,” she said, turning her attention to Stuart. “But I have to tell you that some of them will be reassigned to other ships within a few days.”

Stuart knew that he would not be able to keep his entire crew together, but hearing it from the admiral brought a wave of nausea to him. “I understand Admiral.”

“Could we have a moment in private?” Hernandez politely asked Leeson and Adams. It was phrased as a question, but more of an order was implied.

Leeson and Adams nodded and walked toward a table by the observation windows that looked out into the massive spacedock.

Hernandez motioned for Stuart to sit at a nearby table in the vacant lounge area. “I’ve read your report,” she began. “And I don’t think you should be worried about anything.”

Stuart started to relax a little. “Will I ever get command of another ship?”

Hernandez nodded positively. “You’re a fine commanding officer,” she stated. “Once the formality of the competency hearing is over you shouldn’t have to wait very long for another command.”

“Will I be able to keep most of my existing crew?” Stuart asked. “At least my senior staff?”

Hernandez shrugged. “It’s possible to keep some of you together, but don’t set your hopes too high.” Hernandez straightened in her chair. “I would like to discuss Commander Leeson with you.”

“Of course,” Stuart replied. “What would you like to know?”

## **Chapter 2**

“Come,” Stuart said.

The door slid open, making that familiar and sometimes annoying, swoosh sound. Commander Leeson entered the temporary guest quarters of Rob Stuart. “You wanted to see me, Captain?”

Stuart pointed to a chair, indicating that Leeson should sit down. “Can I get you anything to drink?” he asked as he stepped toward the replicator unit.

“I’ll have whatever you’re having,” she replied.

“Computer,” Stuart said. “Two cups of apple cinnamon tea. Hot, double sweet.”

Stuart carried the freshly replicated beverages toward the center of the room and sat across from Leeson, handing her a cup. “Our time aboard the *Providence* was short, but I believe that you learned much as a first officer,” he said.

“Thank you, Captain.” Leeson started to feel a little awkward. She did not accept praise readily.

Stuart took a sip of his tea. He thought that he had practiced this conversation until he mastered what he would say, but now that the time had come, Stuart found the conversation to be harder than he thought it would be. “Some of the crew will be splitting up,” he finally said. “That includes some of the senior officers.”

Leeson sat silently. She did not want to have the crew divided. For the better part of the past year the crew, especially the senior staff, had developed the ability to function as a team. And what if Blake would be assigned to a different ship from hers. The relationship between her and Blake Adams was beginning to gain momentum.

Leeson finally broke her silence. “Who is being reassigned?”

Stuart pulled out a PADD and read from it. “Salesh has an expertise in engineering that is needed aboard the *Marco Polo*,” he said. “Starfleet wants T’Les on that ship, too.”

“*Marco Polo*?” Leeson inquired. It was not a ship that she had heard of before this moment.

“It’s a new *Ericsson*-class long-range scout,” Stuart informed Leeson. “It’s

docked at repair berth 4.”

Melanie Leeson did not want to lose either of these officers. They had performed above and beyond the call of duty and were the two people most responsible for saving the crew from being stranded on an alien world. “Anyone else, Captain?” She hoped that no other senior officer would be separated from their team.

Stuart sat forward, on the edge of his chair and set his cup on the table that stood between Leeson and himself. “Admiral Hernandez says that one of the new *Katana*-class ships, the U.S.S. *Dallas*, needs a captain.”

Leeson did not think that Stuart would seriously consider accepting command of an escort. After all, he was an explorer, not a soldier. But she still needed to ask the question. “Are you going to take it?”

Stuart smiled half-heartedly. “The question is, Commander,” Stuart began, “are *you* going to take it?”

Leeson’s mouth dropped open. “Me?” She appeared almost speechless. Almost. “I don’t have the experience to command a starship,” she argued.

“I told Admiral Hernandez that I thought you would be perfect for the job,” Stuart said. “With your security background and tactical training, command of an escort vessel would be a great duty station for you.”

“I’m honored by your confidence in me, Captain.” Lesson tried to be humble. “But I committed a minimum of three years to you.”

Stuart appreciated Leeson’s sense of loyalty. “I won’t hold you to that promise, Commander,” he said. “I won’t stand in the way of your career.”

Leeson slumped in her seat. “I’ll consider it, Captain,” she sighed.

“That’s all I ask, Mel,” Stuart said in reply.

### **Chapter 3**

“So what did Rob talk to you about?” Blake Adams asked, setting his milkshake on the table.

Melanie Leeson stared at the table, unwilling to look Adams in the eye. “He said that a ship is available for me to command.”

Adams began to feel his heart thump in his chest. He had thought that the senior staff of the late starship *Providence* would remain together, but he now realized that scenario did not look promising. Blake had come to love Melanie Leeson and now, the possibility existed that they would be separated. “Congratulations,” he said without letting his voice betray the way he really felt.

Melanie looked into his eyes and took Blake by the hand. “It’s a great opportunity, but I don’t want to break up a good team of people,” she said. “I don’t want to be without you.”

“I feel the same way, Mel,” Blake replied. “But you can’t pass up the chance of your own command.”

Leeson stood and walked toward the viewport. Adams followed. They looked through the transparent aluminum windows. That's the ship," she said, pointing to one of the *Katana*-class vessels docked inside the huge station.

Adams tried to smile, but his feelings would not allow it. "She looks like a fine ship." Blake paused. "Will you let me take it out for a spin around the solar system?"

Melanie looked down. "I haven't accepted the command yet." She held Blake's hand tight, not wanting to let go.

Blake touched her chin and drew her face gently upward, forcing Melanie to look at him. "We'll still find time to get together," he assured her. "A command of your own is what you have wanted," he added.

"That's not all I want," Leeson stated with determination. "At this point in my life," she continued, "it really doesn't seem very important."

The two officers stood silently, holding hands.



Stuart entered the restaurant. He scanned the room with his eyes, looking for those who had invited him to dinner. He spied James and Mary Goodman sitting near the rear of the facility and began to move in their direction.

"Good evening," Stuart said, greeting his officers. Could he still consider the Goodmans *his* officers?

James Goodman stood and shook Stuart's hand. "Please have a seat, Captain. The doctor should be joining us soon."

Stuart sat at the table and picked up the nearest menu. "I'm honored to be invited to join you for dinner. What's the occasion?"

James sensed that Stuart was putting on a behavioral front, not wanting to reveal the way that he really was feeling. Although he only carried one-quarter of the genetic make-up from his Betazoid ancestry, James still had the ability to sense another person's emotional condition. And Robert P. Stuart definitely possessed an emotional condition.

Janice Edwards walked toward the table, trying not to bump into the waiters and waitresses that scurried between the replicators and the tables. She finally sneaked through and sat beside Stuart. "Sorry I'm late," she said apologetically. "I ran into an old friend."

Stuart smiled at the doctor and returned to studying the menu, occasionally glancing back toward her. "I hope you're hungry."

Edwards studied Stuart's nonchalance and knew that he was not acting normal. She had come to know him as a commanding officer and as a friend. She did not have James's Betazoid sense, but her instinct and observation told her that Stuart was holding his feelings inward. "I recommend the shrimp," Edwards finally said.

Stuart laid down his menu and smiled at his dinner companions. "Shrimp it is."

"You have been here before?" Mary Goodman asked, trying to make

conversation.

Edwards turned her attention to Mary. “Yes,” she stated. I was on the medical staff here for almost two years.”

“You probably found the best foods on the station,” James Goodman interjected. Turning toward his wife, he added, “We have a restaurant guide while we’re here.”

Edwards chuckled. “I’ll be your guide if you buy all my meals.”

Stuart watched his crew --former crew --as the conversation continued.

## **Chapter 4**

Blake Adams entered the docking port of the newest starship of the fleet. The doors slid closed behind him as a security crewman approached. “I’m Lieutenant Commander Adams,” he stated. “I am here to meet Commander Andropov.”

The crewman stopped and motioned for Adams to follow. “Welcome aboard, Sir,” the crewman stated. “Commander Andropov is waiting in the officer’s lounge.”

Adams followed the crewman through the corridor to the nearest turbolift. The ship was much smaller than the previous ships that he had served, but this one seemed to be well designed for comfort. It was aesthetically pleasing, a quality that the designers must have realized would aid in long-term missions.

The turbolift door opened as the crewman and Blake Adams approached. “Deck 2,” the crewman ordered as the lift doors began to close.

Within seconds the doors parted and the crewman led Adams through a corridor toward a double set of doors. The designation on the door read *Officer’s Lounge*. They entered and the crewman pointed toward the table placed in front of the center window.

“Commander Andropov,” was all the crewman said. He turned and exited the all, but empty room.

Adams walked toward the table. “Commander Andropov?”

Turning in her chair, the engineering officer smiled and motioned Adams to sit in the chair opposite her. “Welcome aboard Mister Adams.”

“Thank you, Commander,” Blake said. “I wanted to talk to you about...”

“Please call me Natalia,” the officer said in a slight Russian accent. “May I call you by your first name?”

Blake sensed that the Russian was being flirtatious, at least a little. That was a role that he played before he started spending more time with Melanie. “Blake,” he stated.

“Blake. I like that,” she said smiling. “What did you want to ask?”

Blake leaned back in his chair. “I was wondering if you could tell me about this ship.”

“The *Marco Polo* is a fine ship,” she began. “We had a little problem with the matter/anti-matter intermix, but your Lieutenant K’Tok has proved to be very helpful.”



“Salesh,” Blake corrected.

“Pardon me?”

“It’s Lieutenant Salesh,” Blake said again. “The family name comes first in his culture.”

“I did not know,” Andropov said apologetically. “Anyway, the *Marco Polo* is the second *Ericsson*-class starship to be launched.”

“What’s types of missions will this ship undertake?” Blake asked.

“This class of ship is designated as a long-range scout,” the commander replied, “so mostly it will conduct survey and mapping missions, first contacts, that sort of thing.”

Blake smiled. “Sounds perfect,” he muttered to himself. “When does she launch?”

Andropov’s curiosity began to take over. “And why would you like to know?”

Blake realized that his inquiries were a little too aggressive, but he had gone this far. “I hope to be on it when it does,” he offered.

Andropov nodded her approval. “Very well,” she said. “I can tell you that once a permanent crew is assigned, the *Marco Polo* will be ready to launch. “She officially enters active service tomorrow evening at 1800 hours.”

Blake rose from his chair and offered his hand to Andropov, who took it in hers. He shook her hand briskly, thanking her for the help that she had given. “I appreciate your time, Commander.”

And Blake Adams turned and walked toward the nearest exit.



Commander Melanie Leeson waited in the outer office area of the starbase command headquarters. The last time that she stood here occurred when she had received her appointment as the first officer of the *Providence*, almost one year before.

She began to pace the floor when the door to Admiral Hernandez’s office slid open. Leeson snapped to attention as the admiral came through the doorway.

“At ease, Commander,” the admiral said. “I understand that you wanted to see me.”

Leeson relaxed and faced Hernandez. “Yes Sir,” she stated. “I wanted to talk to you about my career.”

Hernandez stood still and remained silent.

“Specifically,” Leeson said, responding to the admiral’s cue, “I want to tell you how much I appreciate your confidence in me by offering command of the *Dallas*.”

Hernandez nodded but knew that Leeson had a “but” attached to her statement. “Continue, Commander.”

Leeson swallowed deeply. “I don’t believe that I can accept a promotion at this time,” she blurted out.

“Why not?” Hernandez asked.

Leeson looked Hernandez in the eyes. “I still need to learn much,” she stated. “And I wish to remain Captain Stuart’s first officer on his next posting.

Hernandez paced in a circle around Leeson, who stood with hands behind her back. “What if Captain Stuart doesn’t get command of another ship?”

“I can’t imagine him not getting one, Sir.”

“The results of tomorrow’s hearing will decide his status,” the admiral stated without committing her position. “He might get a desk position or be reduced in rank.”

Leeson shook her head in disbelief. “I don’t think that will happen, Admiral,” Leeson stated with confidence. “Captain Stuart lost his ship, but he secured the safety of every person under his command.”

Hernandez stopped and turned to face Leeson. “I admire your loyalty, Commander.”

“It’s not just loyalty to Captain Stuart, Admiral,” Leeson interjected. “I hope that the entire senior staff will stay together. We have developed a good rapport and sense of teamwork.”

Hernandez smiled at Leeson. “I’ll see what we can do, Commander Leeson,” she said. “Once the hearing is over... well, we’ll see.”

“Thank you, Admiral,” Leeson said, returning the smile.

Leeson snapped to attention as the Hernandez turned to re-enter her office.

## **Chapter 5**

“And it is your contention that Captain Stuart followed every precaution before ordering the ship to make planetfall,” the JAG prosecutor stated as he paced in front of the witness stand.

“It is not only my contention,” Lieutenant Commander T’Les stated stoically, “but it is a fact.”

“From your point of view,” the prosecutor said.

“Yes,” T’Les reiterated. “We can only state the facts as they appear from our own points of view.”

Hanson, the JAG prosecutor, did not care for Vulcans. He had always thought that they seemed too “uppity” for his taste. “How do you explain the fact that the substance that led to the destruction of the *Providence* could not be identified?”

T’Les stared down the prosecutor with as much calm resolve that any Vulcan might be capable of. “It was an unknown anomalous gas that our sensors were incapable of identifying,” she began. “The captain’s decision to land on the planet’s surface was correct in accordance with the available data that we had at that time.”

“Which was not enough it seems,” Lieutenant Commander Hanson jabbed.

The gavel hit the desk hard. “I remind you, Commander, that this is just a

hearing,” Admiral Hernandez said sternly. “It is not a court-martial.”

Hanson nodded toward the table where Admiral Hernandez, Captain Helen Taggart, the head of the sector JAG Office, and Captain Geisler of the Logistics Office sat. “My apologies, Admiral.” And he returned to his seat.

“Are there any further questions for this witness?” Captain Taggart asked, looking in Stuart’s direction.

Lieutenant Nakamara stood up from his seat next to Stuart. “Not at this time, Sir,” he said. “I would like to request a short recess before Captain Stuart takes the stand.”

Hernandez conferred with her colleagues. “Granted,” she said. Fifteen minutes.”

The room began to clear. Stuart, however, remained seated.

Blake, noticing his best friend, approached him. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Stuart tried to smile. “I’m doing fine,” he said. “I just wonder if I did make an error in judgment.”

“Every member of your crew that’s testified has said that you were not to blame for what happened,” Blake stated positively. “Get rid of your doubts, Rob.”

“Yes, Sir!” Rob Stuart said humorously. “I get the point.”

Stuart rose and walked out of the room with Adams, realizing that he did do all that he could do to save the ship. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was not responsible for the loss of his ship.

## **Chapter 6**

Rob Stuart surveyed the area near the ship as it sat serenely in the valley. He noticed a few small animal species draw near to the ship ever so cautiously, their curiosity inching them closer. He looked over the horizon, seeing the sun begin to set, and found it improbable that the upper atmosphere could be so turbulent that it could disrupt a positive transporter lock and prevent shuttles from coming to the surface without being severely damaged. Or destroyed.

As he enjoyed the beauty that this world had to offer, Stuart was interrupted by the chirp of an incoming com signal. He tapped the insignia on his chest. “Stuart here.”

*“It’s Leeson, Captain,”* the voice declared. *“We have a problem, Sir.”*

Stuart became concerned. “Can you be more specific, Commander?”

*“We found an alien spacecraft,”* she continued. *“T’Les did an analysis on the remains and found that an unknown element in the atmosphere has eaten away most of the tritanium in its hull.”*

Stuart stood momentarily silent. Tritanium was the primary component in Federation starships as well, meaning that his ship was in deep trouble. “I’ll meet you on the ship. Stuart out.”

The captain of the U.S.S. *Providence* ran back toward the ship, pulling his tricorder out from its holder. He started scanning the hull for any signs of decay. And his fears were immediately realized.

He stood under the secondary hull near the forward landing struts. A thin layer of gel, the apparent byproduct of tritanium being dissolved, had started to form. Stuart began to think of ways to stop the spread of this cancer, knowing that it was confined to the outside of the ship. For now.

He tapped his combadge. "Stuart to *Providence*," he said, activating the com signal.

"*Yes, Captain?*" Lieutenant Mary Goodman's voice echoed.

"I want you to recall all survey teams immediately," Stuart said. "Full decontamination protocols are in effect for all transporters."

"*Yes Sir,*" Mary replied. "*May I ask what's happened, Captain?*"

Stuart thought for an appropriate answer. "We'll discuss that when all senior officers are back on board," he replied. "Have me beamed up now."



Stuart entered the conference room and sat in his usual spot.

"What's wrong, Captain?" a newly promoted Lieutenant Nakamara inquired urgently.

"We're in trouble," Stuart replied. "As soon as Commander Leeson and Lieutenant Commander T'Les arrive...."

Leeson and T'Les entered the room before Stuart had a chance to complete the sentence. They each sat down, aware of the other senior officers' curious stares.

Stuart cleared his throat. "Commander, will you fill us in?"

Leeson looked around at everyone. Commander T'Les and I discovered the remains of an alien ship. It did not appear to have crashed, but little was left of its structure." She paused, waiting to see if Stuart wanted to ask any questions before continuing. "No tritanium was found."

Salesh began to realize the implication. "What happened to the tritanium, Commander?" he asked, believing that he knew the answer already.

"I'm going to turn the rest of this over to Commander T'Les," Leeson stated.

T'Les faced her comrades. "A previously undetected gaseous element in this planet's atmosphere appears to dissolve tritanium."

"What do you mean when you say dissolve?" Adams asked.

T'Les continued. "It is similar in effect to oxidization," the Vulcan stated. "It leaves a gelatinous residue as the tritanium's molecular cohesion is broken down."

Stuart rubbed his temples, realizing that his ship was being eaten by a gaseous parasite. "Can we stop the decay?" he asked.

"Logically," T'Les began, "when we leave the planet's atmosphere, the decay should stop. However, this gas may not succumb to logic."

Stuart gave a half-hearted smile, noticing the T'Les was trying to lighten the

mood amongst the officers. “How much time before the ship’s hull decays beyond repair?”

“Based on my readings of the alien ship,” T’Les said confidently, “our hull will be essentially gone within four point eight three days. If we stay within the atmosphere.”

There was only one decision to make. “Duty stations,” Stuart ordered. “We’re taking off in five minutes.”



The *Intrepid*-class starship flew upward through the turbulent upper atmosphere, finally entering the vacuum of space. It orbited Trilarnax II, its sensors scanning itself to find signs that the danger to its hull had passed. Unfortunately, it had not.

On the bridge, the captain paced the deck. “Has the decay stopped?”

“Negative,” the Vulcan science officer stated coldly. “It has only slowed the rate of decay.”

Stuart could not believe his ears. “Time?”

T’Les ran several computations through her computer console, cross-verified for accurate results. “We will have seventeen days before the ship begins to lose hull integrity.”

“Blake, set a straight course for Federation space, maximum warp,” Stuart ordered. “Mister Nakamara, send a class one distress signal in all known languages.”

Stuart looked toward Leeson. “Exec, have all shuttles and runabouts stocked for emergency rations and begin assigning personnel to each one for evacuation.”

“Aye, Sir,” Leeson responded.

“Try to assign families to the runabouts, Exec,” Stuart added.

And the crippled ship began its long journey homeward.

## **Chapter 7**

“We made it to the edge of Romulan space before structural integrity began to fail,” Stuart said.

Hanson stood before the witness box. “Tell us what happened next.”

Stuart shifted in his seat. “We evacuated the ship through the use of shuttles, runabouts, and escape pods,” he said. “A Romulan freighter picked us up the following day and transported us to the Federation border, where we transferred to the U.S.S. *Eisenhower* for transport to Starbase 82.”

Hanson sat down at his table. “Did you ever locate the aliens that sent the distress signal?”

Stuart shook his head. “No, we did not.”

“Then your ship was lost for nothing,” Hanson said, implying failure on Stuart’s part. “Isn’t that right?”

“Objection,” Nakamara said. “The fact that no one was rescued does not mean that someone had not been there to rescue. Maybe they had already been picked up by someone else or they might have been hiding from us. They could have even been dead.”

“Objection sustained,” Hernandez stated. Does the prosecutor have any other questions?” she asked.

“No more questions, Admiral,” Hanson said as he leaned back in his chair.

“Mister Nakamara?”: Hernandez cued.

“One question,” Nakamara indicated. “Captain, how many lives were lost on the final mission of the *Providence*?”

Stuart straightened his posture with pride. “None.”

“No more questions, Admiral,” Nakamara said, sitting down.

“Captain Stuart,” Hernandez said, “you may return to your seat.

Stuart arose and made his way to his table where he sat down with Nakamara. He was confident that this proceeding would turn out alright.

Hernandez stood, along with Captains Taggart and Geisler. “We will recess for thirty minutes and return with our decision,” the admiral stated.



Commander Leeson and Doctor Edwards were beside each other, talking about the expected outcome of the hearing. Stuart approached them and leaned close to keep from being overheard. “Where’s Blake?” he asked.

“He had an important communiqué,” Leeson said. “He should be back shortly.”

As if he knew that people were talking about him, Blake entered the courtroom and sat down next to the Goodmans, Sales, and T’Les. He glanced at Leeson and Stuart, giving a “thumbs up”.

Before Stuart could ask what that was all about, the three officers that presided over the hearing entered from another doorway. He immediately went back to the defense table and stood next to Nakamara.

Hernandez remained standing as her colleagues and the rest of the people in the courtroom sat down. “Captain Stuart,” she said. “The presiding officers of this hearing have determined that you did, in fact, follow Starfleet protocols and procedures in this matter.”

Stuart sighed with relief. The officers and friends that he had served with burst out with applause.

“Order,” Hernandez said, banging the gavel several times. “We also find that you used good judgment during your mission and could not have foreseen nor prevented the loss of the U.S.S. *Providence*.” Hernandez let down the stoic expression on his face. “It is the recommendation of this hearing that you be given command of another starship at the earliest convenience.”

Stuart could not help but smile.

“This hearing is closed,” Hernandez said as she let the gavel strike one more time.

## **Chapter 8**

Stuart and the officers that had been, and were still, under his command walked toward the gangway where the *Ericsson*-class starship was docked. Stuart glanced out a window to see several people in space suits working on his new ship.

Admiral Hernandez stood at the podium and began the ceremony as she saw Stuart approaching. “Today, the U.S.S. *Marco Polo* enters active service under the command of Captain Robert P. Stuart.”

Stuart shook hands with those around him.

“And because of the exemplary service that this crew has made and the sacrifice they have lived through,” Hernandez began, “we rename this ship U.S.S. *Providence* by order of Starfleet Command, under the recommendation of Captains Gray and Johnson of the *Ericsson*-class construction project.”

Stuart could not believe it. The *Providence* would live again.



As Stuart entered the bridge for the first time, he noticed a crewman installing a new dedication plaque. He sat in the center seat to get a “feel” for it. As he sat down, with Leeson and Adams standing on each side of him, the holographic graphic communications platform in front of the main viewer came to life. Admiral Robert Hathaway of Starfleet Operations appeared.

“How do you like your new ship, Robby,” the image of Hathaway inquired.

“I think I’ll like it, Uncle Bob,” Stuart replied. “I’ll be glad when we can actually launch this ship. I want to see what she’s got.”

“I’m told that she’s got what it takes,” Hathaway said, “to resume your mission to the Beta Quadrant.” The holographic image smiled at his nephew. “Are you up for that?”

“Aye, Sir,” Stuart replied.

“Then I’ll let you be on your way,” Hathaway stated. “God’s speed.”

And the holographic transmission ended.

Stuart glanced back at his two most senior officers. “We have a couple days before launch,” he said. “What do we do until then?”

Adams’ face lit up. “Poker in my quarters.”

Stuart chuckled. “As long as fate doesn’t deal the cards this time.”

The trio laughed as they moved toward the turbolift.

**The End**